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ABSTRACT

It is the creative writing instructor's role to help the student turn "twitch" poems into "click" poems ("twitch" being a kind of verbal hypertension that takes shape in the absence of anything humanly important to say on the poet's part and "click" being the finished poem that makes a sound like the click of the lid on a perfectly made box). Teachers can help students achieve this by letting them know that a poem may begin with the self, but it should never end there. Students need to learn that the well-made poem is not a bundle of devices, but an individual's insight, and that a good poem transcends its author's intentions and understanding. Teachers need also to make students comfortable with criticism, and provide them with alternative approaches to poetry writing. Teachers must also help students establish a set of critical standards, let them earn praise, and not let them make poems of what is directly in front of them. Teachers should not seek to liberate students from fears, inhibitions, defenses, and prejudices, but should let them know about the potential poems around them. (HOD)

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THE CLICK AND TWITCH IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Bernard Meredith

One of the most difficult problems for the student of creative writing lies in his ability to distinguish between a self-indulgent singular kind of poetry and that which has a universally orchestrated vision. Because he is most often a newcomer to the writing, or, for that matter, the reading of contemporary poetry, he may lack a sense of self-criticism--every poem he writes is a love child and he is committed to keeping it out of harm's way. Often, his poetry lapses into the imitative or derivative simply because it is "safe".

The result is poetry that "twitches" with oddball imagery on the one hand, or mi- cry of the traditional on the other. This attitude, however, is not the fault of the student; much of his wrongheaded notions about what poetry "should" be come from the formative years of his education. It is, then, the responsibility of the instructor to help his student make poems that "click like the lid on a perfectly made box." To be sure, that lesson does not begin and end during one semester of creative writing, neither for the student nor the instructor. It is an ongoing process and the lesson begins anew with every poem.

I would like to begin by explaining the terms of my subject for discussion "The Click and Twitch in Contemporary Poetry". They are not mine; I have borrowed "twitch" from the poet James Wright who said that the theory of our "rent-free verse" involves a complete rejection of the past. The endless bad poems of our time distribute themselves between masturbation and exquisitely phoney middle-class revolution. Rhyme, rhythm and technique are out, "Twitch" is in. Twitch is a kind of verbal hypertension that takes shape in the absence of anything humanly important to say on the poet's part. "Click", on the other hand, is borrowed from Yeats' idea that the finished poem should make a sound like the click of the lid on a perfectly made box. It is then the creative writing instructor's mission to help the student turn "twitch" poems into "click" poems.

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What produces the "Twitch" in contemporary poetry? I believe that twitch is the effect of a poetry that substitutes artifice in the absence of voice. The artifice may manifest itself in oddball imagery that collapses under its own weight, or in the self-indulgent vision that lets no one in but the poet himself. Or it may confuse the mysterious with mystery. In any event, twitch is a short-circuiting of the poetic imagination--a quick answer to the poetic process. Much of contemporary poetry exists without a criticism of itself because it lacks a sense of history, or ideas that help develop a body of criticism. When such poetry becomes so phenomenalistic, so attached to the present that it becomes merely a verbal event without past or future, it lacks the element of faith.

Out of this impasse emerges two kinds of poetry: that which attaches itself to the material would so exclusively that transcendence is impossible, or the reverse, poetry that never attaches itself to the material world, and must exist forever one step beyond our apprehension, that is to say, not exist at all. At their worst, image poems are good examples of the former, surrealistic poems, of the latter. In no instance are the true elements of mystery, vision, imagery and voice served. Integration does not take place--the inner and outer worlds do not come together.

Like the internally directed poetry of the surreal, whose urgency seems to lie in the obfuscation of vision, confessionalism often twitches with the desire of self-destruction. It turns ever inward, away from the world in order to contemplate its own navel.

Twitch in our students' poetry is, however, not malicious; it is more often imitative and derivative. It comes of the desire for immediate gratification and recognition. But it is a virulent strain, highly contagious and often fatal. Young poets succumb to it out of their very desire to be like their masters. But like Kitto's explantion of the Greeks' concept of fate, simply because they did not know the potion was poision when they drank it does not mean they won't die.

The contemporary poet whose poems say "look how interesting I am" has already failed. But the poet whose poems make the reader say "look how interesting I am" has a good chance for survival. It seems that truly bad contemporary poetry suffers from egomania and self-revelation, from the mistaken belief that the world wants to know about us as individuals. So we hang out our dirty linen for everyone to take notice, only to find out that our neighbors are doing the same thing. But egomania is only partly to blame for the twitch; the other problem is the incredibly broad scope of contemporary poetry. Never before have there been so many people writing so many kinds of poems representing so many schools of poetry. To name a few: The New-York School, the Projectivists, the San Francisco School, the Surrealists, the Midwestern School. And the kinds of poems the poet can make are just as numerous: concrete poems, leaping poems, deep image and deep structure poems, personal poems, zen poems, letter poems, prose poems. Contemporary poetry is, in fact, so broad as to be unassailable from any particular front. Its very amorphousness protects it. But like the dinosour it risks extinction because of its gigantism.

I contend that contemporary poetry need not risk extinction because of its size; after all, size can be a sign of good health, too. What contemporary poetry needs is a counter balance, an equal and opposite force, a body of criticism to keep it viable, to make it click instead of twitch.

First, good contemporary poetry begins to click like Yeats' perfectly made box when the elements of mystery, imagery and voice blend into the poem like a well-struck chord. Perhaps my own good sense at this point should tell me to invoke the Heisenberg Principal of Physics which states, in effect, that it is impossible to observe without distortion that circumstance of which you are a part. And I am indeed a part of the contemporary poetry scene. I've felt the influence of poets whom I greatly admire--Wright, Hugo, Kinnell, Matthews-to the point that I have heard their echoes in my own voice. Robert Penn Warren reminds us by his own good example

that to become too comfortable and too facile with out poetry is dangerous because it is "safe." The tightrope of good poetry is stretched across an abyss, and the poet must be willing to risk everything. The encounter with ecstasy, which Denise Levertov says is worth every risk, provides genuine vision in the poem. But learning to keep one's balance takes time.

By now it's clear that I've waived Heisenberg's principle and move recklessly ahead. And trying to define voice is as reckless as one can get in contemporary poetry; it is the sum total of thought and feeling that becomes the unmistakable mark of the poet's work. And voice refined becomes his style--or perhaps it's the other way around--in any event it is unteachable. But again, it is a part of what makes a poem click.

The next element of good contemporary poetry is its sound imagery. And in the war between Pound and Bly as to where it begins, inside or out, I do not wish to take part. Rather, I'll follow another lead, that of a modifier error in grammar that makes good sense in poetry: the squinting modifier. A good image squints, that is, looks both ways to the interior and the exterior, creates a harmonious balance between the two worlds and sheds new and transforming light in both.

The mystery of good contemporary poetry lies, as well, in a balance, one between engagement and elusiveness, and its ability to astonish us. The poem and its sense of mystery should not slam shut like the door to a detective story with all the leads resolved, all the questions answered. It should click shut with a sense of wonderment. The truly good poem invites us back into its mystery with a challenge rather than a threat. The poetry of polemics is a good example of the threat that undermines our sense of wonderment. Political and protest poetry, for example, draw our attention away from the poem and onto the floor of another debate, force us to take stands outside poetry with a "you're for us or against us" kind of threat.

Voice and persona are equally critical elements of good contemporary poetry, and again a balance must be struck. As I have pointed out earlier, there is no effective short-cut to voice--we do not manufacture our poetic voice; it comes to us, subtlely, as a result of years of "hanging around language" (Frost's phrase) until we begin to make it work for us rather than the reverse. Persona, which is often confused with voice in contemporary poetry, is a somewhat different matter. It can be manipulated, even short-circuited to produce a false sense of health in the poem. Poets sometimes adopt other poet's personae--again, its intend is not malicious nor it is thievery; it's admiration that leads to imitation. Jack Kerouac once said that he knew that something had gone wrong in the message of the beat generation writers when he saw a pack of wild-eyed teenagers piling over the fence wall to his house, all sporting "Beatnik" T-shirts with his face caricatured on them. And our literary magazines of today too often condone, in fact, encourage the familiar persona. American Poetry Review literally rings with the too familiar persona and image. Paris Review and Poetry Northwest do too. But don't mistake me here; these are quality literary magazines, which give fine young poets a chance to publish and be seen. Perhaps it's just part of our modern-day malady of specialization that I'm objecting to here; send your political poems to Antioch and Wormwood, your surreal poems to Paris Review and your traditional poems to Sewanee.

Now, back to a well-formed body of criticism to act as counterbalance to the amorphous body of contemporary poetry. It's okay if in the process or the end we break our own rules; the idea is to make a few of them, to be willing to assume some degree of autnority about what we know to be good advice. There are a handful who have already taken up the banner: Donald Hall, Denise Levertov, Richard Hugo, William Stafford, Robert Bly. In our foundation of a body of critical theory, we need not deny the past simply because our poetry is of the contemporary era.

In closing, here are a few suggestions from my own experience in teaching

writing; They might be of some use to you:

1. The poem may begin with the self, the first person "I"; but it should never end there. The problem here becomes self-absorption to the exclusion of the rest of the work.

2. The reader's experience of the poem, his interest and involvement in it, remains an identification of its excellence.

3. The well-made poem is not a bundle of devices, techniques, or schools, but individual insight.

4. A good poem transcends its author's intention and understanding, unlike the bad poem which is under his control at every point, never saying more than he wants it to.

5. Work at making the student comfortable with criticism--help him to be his own best critic, to have the ability to say "this is crap-this is unworthy," because he'll be on his own most of the time.

6. Shake him loose from the years of poetic diction and battered cliches that he's heard poetry is all about.

7. Let him know that his own conversational tones, his personal history and his own geography are good places for poems to start.

8. Indentify poems of well-known poets whose subjects are similar to those of his own poems; let him see alternative approaches and evaluate them.

9. Don't let poetry be anything he wants it to be--help him establish a set of critical standards for his poems and for those of his peers.

10. Don't lavish praise upon his every written word; let him earn it. He'll have to learn to live without it most of the time, anyway.

11. Don't make poems of what is directly before him; the results will be too studied and formulaic. Help him to develop a peripheral vision, to catch those fleeting things that most often miss our attention.

12. Let him keep his: fears, inhibition, defenses, prejudices; don't try to liberate his feelings-let him do it with poems. We all know that poetry comes out of dark places. Let him find the light switch.

13. Let him know that there are potential poems all around him, that he must attune his senses to the world of language.

14. And let him know that you're still struggling too, always looking for the "click" poem, always looking for new ways to say the things that mean the most to us, that help us recognize each other in the darkness.